Comparing Two Characters in *Nostromo*:
Dr. Monygham and Don Martin Decoud

“It was obviously impossible to take his knowledge of Father Berón home with him to Europe...these conditions seemed to bind him indissolubly to the land of Costaguana, like an awful procedure of naturalization.” (613)

Dr. Monygham’s tormenting memories of Father Berón bind him to Costaguana. He is unable to return “home” to Europe because of “these conditions”—the disgrace he feels for surrendering to Father Berón’s questioning. But years later, under similar pressure from Sotillo, Dr. Monygham doesn’t surrender—he holds out to defend Sulaco and therefore Mrs. Gould. Don Martin Decoud goes through a parallel psychological struggle when he is left alone on the island. He needs to stay alive for the same reasons that motivate Monygham—for Sulaco’s independence and therefore his woman—but where Monygham is successful, Decoud fails and kills himself after seven days. The difference between these two characters, and what eventually distinguishes their fate, lies in Monygham’s traumatic memories of Father Berón. Monygham is bound to Costaguana because of these memories, while Decoud is constantly trying to separate himself from Costaguana. Decoud’s need to separate himself ultimately leads to his death—when Decoud finally does leave Sulaco in the lighter, the separation allows Decoud to question his motives for his struggle and eventually lose motivation.

As Decoud moves away from Sulaco, the separation makes him feel detached from reality. The first sign of this detachment is a distinct change in language. Conrad begins to use a passive voice when describing Decoud’s actions—“the Capataz was heard again” (530). By using the passive voice here Conrad physically separates Decoud’s thoughts from his body—Decoud’s ears don’t hear the Capataz, his abstract thoughts hear and interpret the Capataz. This
suggests that Decoud is no longer a person interacting with his surroundings, but rather a more omniscient perspective on the scene. To Decoud this omniscient perspective feels like a dreamlike state—“they floated vivid and light, like unearthly clear dreams” (525). This omniscient perspective feels dreamlike and “unearthly” because he is seeing his life from an outsider’s perspective that feels very foreign.

From his omniscient perspective on the lighter Decoud is able to look at his life differently. He is removed from the action and emotion on shore, and this allows him to analyze the motivation behind his actions. Decoud’s actions to make Sulaco independent from Costaguana had been driven by his love for Antonia. Out on the lighter, however, Decoud sees the weakness of his connection to Antonia—“His passionate devotion to Antonia into which he had worked himself up of the depths of his skepticism had lost all appearance” (529). Without passion for Antonia, Decoud has no reason to fight for Sulaco’s independence, and therefore no reason to be out on the lighter trying to save the silver.

Decoud ultimately kills himself because he is able to look at his life from a separate perspective. From the moment the lighter pushes off from Sulaco Conrad’s language predicts this. Conrad alludes to this connection between Decoud’s separation and his death by repeatedly calling the darkness of the lighter “deathlike.” Because the darkness makes it difficult for Decoud to connect with his surroundings—“even his hand before his face did not exist before his eyes”—it separates him from reality and allows him his omniscient perspective (525). For a moment on the lighter, Nostromo’s candle provides relief from the darkness, and therefore from his omniscient perspective. When Nostromo puts the light out again, the transition reveals to Decoud why he is so afraid of the darkness. This is the pivotal moment that ultimately leads to Decoud’s downfall—“The Capataz, extending his hand, put out the candle suddenly. It was to
Decoud as if his companion had destroyed, by a single touch, the world of affairs, of loves, of revolution, where his complacent superiority analyzed fearlessly all motives and all passions, including his own” (535). The darkness is “deathlike” because the separation from his life in Sulaco, created by the darkness, makes Decoud kill himself.

The reason behind Decoud’s death, especially in comparison to the reasons for Monygham’s survival, brings up questions of the reader’s place in this framework. As subjective viewers into Conrad’s Nostromo, we are always separate—we can always have the omniscient perspective that gives Decoud such insight at the end of his life. So then why have we not killed ourselves? The days before Decoud’s death, the disgust that he directs at all the weightless lives in Sulaco, seems instead to be directed at the reader. “In our activity alone do we find the sustaining illusion of an independent existence as against the whole scheme of things of which we form a helpless part” (711). With this statement, ultimately solidified by Decoud’s death, Conrad seems to be mocking us, as he does everyone in Sulaco, for continuing to live with such ease. He seems to be saying that if we were to look at our own lives closely enough, as we look at Decoud’s out on the lighter, we would follow the same fate.